Helmut Lent –
a Character Portrait

by
Helene "Lena" Lent

(translated from the German original by Andreas J. Voigt)

... dedicated to
Major General Ibel

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Bundeswehr Lent Barracks in Rotenburg (Wümme)

"A man's destiny is his character," Bismarck said. Just as Helmut Lent's destiny was simple yet great, so too was his character simple yet humanly great. Just as he developed as a soldier into a leader and role model, he also increaseingly developed into a personality.

"To have personality means to have character," he says in his letter to the commanders. *"But to have character means to summon the will, as a soldierly leader, to overcome every difficulty and to transmit this will to one's subordinates. To have character means to fight against all negligence, against a lack of commitment, against a comfortable life, first and foremost against oneself, but also against one's men. Not to mention the fight against the enemy."*

This is how the moral strengths of his character worked in him. But what distinguished him from the other officers, from the other successful night fighters?

It's difficult to pinpoint this, because Helmut Lent was reserved and hostile toward all PK (propaganda company) correspondents, even harsh. He rarely spoke openly and confided in his innermost thoughts and opinions only to a small circle of people close to him, with whom he felt truly understood.

Thus, he had few close friendships, for a male friendship was something precious to him, something rare and profound. For him, it was a moral bond that entailed many duties and a deep commitment from one to the other, and consequently, one that could rarely be given away. Due to his modesty, he rarely spoke about his personal concerns among his comrades.

And yet, from many individual traits, experiences in calm and readiness, like small mosaic stones, an outline, a figure, emerges that reveals Helmut Lent's character.

We are not only interested in the typical qualities and the virtues that Helmut Lent had to possess and did possess as an exemplary officer—such as a highly developed sense of honor, toughness and relentlessness, courage and bravery, inner and outer poise, determination and a sense of responsibility, truthfulness and honesty, camaraderie and discretion, self-confidence yet modesty, selflessness and self-discipline—although the objection that no virtue is without weakness is permissible. We also want to learn about the uniqueness of his humanity, just as every person is a unique phenomenon and a unique structure and a unique harmony of various strengths, abilities, talents, and characteristics.

His talents, which for him—as for so many men of that generation—were first developed through and in war, were perfected early on, thus reinforcing the saying that war is the father of all things.

The most striking quality of his character, probably the first to be noticed by all who ever knew him, was his absolute inner purity and integrity. He never did or even thought anything that contradicted this inner purity and honesty. Everything about him was clear and pure, with an uncompromising straightforwardness.

Everyone had unconditional confidence in his truthfulness and integrity, which made him uncomfortable for many, for he displayed courage not only in action, not only in the bat-

tle against the enemy, but also in his official and private life, and thus he represented his convictions, even when they were not well-liked, even in higher positions. He did not seek to be popular, but only to serve the greater cause. He never did anything for personal gain.

Furthermore, the essence of him was the breadth of his soul, which ranged from radiant, carefree, and sunny boyishness to deep seriousness, genuine piety, immersion in ethical and religious problems, reflection on many ideological questions followed by long debates with his friends, just as his entire being was rooted in a deep, genuine Christian faith, from which he drew the strength to shape his life. This great spiritual breadth, uniting many contradictions, did not result in disharmony or being torn back and forth, but rather made him an internally rich, stimulating and versatile personality.

Helmut Lent is a typical fighter nature, a man of deeds for whom action, breaking resistance, and combat are essentials of life and give him satisfaction. The Nordic, warlike element of his ancestors, among whom there are many officers who have served Prussia, breaks through in him with full force.

The time when no missions are flown or he cannot visit his night fighter wing groups makes him dissatisfied and dejected. However, he does not combat to satisfy his own need for recognition, for civic prestige, or for material gain or advantageous purposes—his ethical principles do not permit this. Rather, he dedicates his entire personality to the common good, to a lofty, supra-personal goal—for his fatherland, for his homeland. Thus, he is not a mercenary, a

Landsknecht, for he does not fight for the sake of fighting, but in pursuit of an ethical goal.

This dynamic personality, this active man with great resilience, concentration, determination, and a tenacious, dogged perseverance, is rooted in a fierce temperament that supports the assertion of his will and gives him drive and enthusiasm, but also carries the risk of outbursts and irritability, which he seeks to suppress with self-control and an ambition for self-improvement.

An idealist in his beliefs, Helmut Lent is a clear realist in his actions, who does not take into account people's weaknesses and complacency, approaches the tasks set before him with a sober sense of reality, and harbors no illusions about individuals, enabling him to take the right measures and ultimately achieve his set goals.

His active will is expressed in great assertiveness, in determination, and decisiveness, whereby his intransigence, imperviousness, and inflexibility still support him in carrying out the tasks assigned to him, although he gladly listens to the judgment of others. Nevertheless, his decisions and rulings, both as a group commander and as a wing commodore, are ultimately based on his own critical thinking, his discernment, and his quick grasp of the situation, above all in his clear vision and independent judgment, which he will not allow to be taken away from him.

As eloquent and communicative as he could be when it came to major matters, he could be just as taciturn and silent when it came to recounting personal experiences.

Despite his temperamental nature, his liveliness, excitability, and open-mindedness, he mastered life through moderation and self-discipline, whereby his exceptionally strong will, which was not foreign to profound emotions—for he was a lover of flora, fauna, and animals—gave him a resilient elasticity. His sense of duty, his loyalty to his convictions and firmness of mind, as well as his love of the cause and his love and sense of justice, made him a respected superior.

Other qualities such as highly developed practical intelligence, powers of observation and organization, initiative, prudence, organizational talent, and attentiveness enabled him to consistently fulfill the position entrusted to him.

Uninhibited and simple in character, although sometimes short-tempered and withdrawn, he won people over with his freshness and naturalness.

His parents gave him the unpretentiousness and modesty in his personal life, moral seriousness and inner purity, and a natural confidence that allowed him to find the right tone in every situation.

Compromises, half-measures, and ambiguities are repugnant to his character—he demands uncompromising integrity, openness, straightforwardness, and clarity. Although he possesses great wisdom and a good understanding of human nature despite his young age, diplomatic maneuvers are completely alien to him and he rejects them. He is reluctant to make promises, for nothing is more embarrassing to him than the thought of not being able to keep

his promise. But once he has made a promise, you can absolutely rely on it.

Just as Prussianism is rich in personalities who reveal tenderness of soul and depth of feeling, so too was Helmut Lent, only his shy reserve meant that one rarely noticed it.

His great sense of responsibility and his strong desire for independence demanded a broad and rich field of activity. Struggle, work, anticipation—these are his life's elements. *"I know I'm probably not a comfortable subordinate,"* he sometimes said, *"but I'm probably a good superior."*

Despite his capacity for enjoyment and his appreciation of beauty and art, he rarely finds true peace, relaxation, and enjoyment. A friend with whom he was together a few days before his tragic end writes of him:

> *"In contrast to many night fighter pilots I knew, who, due to their youth and the nature of their missions, seemed very carefree to me, I was struck by a particular seriousness in Lent. Lent was fully aware of his responsibility as a wing commodore, but above all of the gravity of his task. For him, even the time when he wasn't flying missions was dedicated to preparing for his difficult missions. It was often astonishing to me how his officers and enlisted men, some of whom were older than him in years, looked up to him with absolute respect and complete trust, although on no occasion did I detect the tone usually used by military superiors. His orders and instructions were given, I might almost say, in a calm, yet firm tone. In fact, I was never able to shake off the feeling that in every private con-*

versation, his thoughts wandered to his task. Very often, he interrupted private conversations and gave official instructions."

His character, his ethos, and his outstanding ability made him a recognized leader. His official instructions and remarks were distinguished by clarity of thought and consistency in execution. His quick-tempered nature demanded rapid work.

Despite his young age, he instinctively understood the art of practical education and leadership, knowing that giving the example and being a role model are the most educative.

Helmut Lent certainly had a healthy ambition—*"Every soldier must have healthy ambition,"* he often said, and was pleased when his group, or later, his wing, was the most successful. But he never aspired to elevate his own worth in the eyes of his peers or even to pursue a career. Thus, he was free of pathological ambition and didn't allow himself to be irritated or whipped up when some record number, such as the 50th, 75th, or 100th aerial victory, awaited him, but flew this mission calmly and thoughtfully, as always.

The view of enjoying every minute of life and living it to the fullest, not knowing if you'll return tomorrow—this sometimes strained joy in life that one finds in so many primitive natures engaged in dangerous professions, the unselective savoring of every pleasure that presents itself, is something one looks for in vain in him, as his profound ethical outlook on life prevents him from doing so and leads him to pursue other paths—paths that lead to a conscious design of life, to profound reflection on the ultimate

questions of human existence, to an account of life and death, which he answered with a profound faith in God, so that he was always ready. And even though his life was short, it was lived intensely and consciously.

While he knew and indulged in life's pleasures, his priority was his profession, night fighting, the defense of the fatherland, the repulsion and destruction of the enemy, and the education of the young pilots. He himself is the embodiment of the principle he sets forth in his “Remarks on Night Fighting”:

> *"As I already pointed out in my initial remarks, the night fighter who wishes to achieve success must deal with the subject of night fighting daily, if not hourly. Day and night, every night fighter should concern himself with how to most effectively attack the enemy. Only those who constantly allow such thoughts to run through their heads will not fail at the decisive moment, but will go into battle with the necessary tactical equipment."*

These remarks on night fighter operations and his letters of 22 June and 18 August 1944 to his group commanders clearly reveal his character and nature.

Moltke's quote, which hangs above his desk and served as his guiding principle, is indicative of his personal life:

"Be more than you seem, achieve much and protrude little," while Moltke's second quote—*"First consider, then dare"*—was applicable to his flying career.

Despite his great love of truth, he was neither capable of flattery toward superiors, nor was he susceptible to it, as he saw through any sycophanticism.

In his duties, he was tough and relentless, but his harshness was never senseless and never degenerated into harassment. He could be tough and relentless because he only demanded what he demanded of himself.

He refused to celebrate lavish feasts and parties within the officer corps. However, if there was a real reason—for example, the 100th, 250th, or 300th kill of the group, or the 500th, or even the 1000th of the corps, when a decoration was awarded to his comrades or to him, or after a particularly successful night—then the boyishness contained by the hard and responsible service would break through. He could thus be boisterous like a boy, enlivening the table with his witty, lively conversation and the recounting of anecdotes, of which he knew a whole collection, and captivating them with the natural charm of his personality.

Otherwise, however, it was rare that the seriousness with which he devoted himself entirely to his duties as wing commodore left him. Yet when he could detach himself from his duties and his great responsibility, he was a carefree, sunny, cheerful, and exuberant big boy, lively and witty in conversation, full of mischief and high spirits. A friend of his wrote:

> *"He undoubtedly could have taken the opportunity to visit us in Hamburg many times, to spend a few happy hours and meet people from other spheres of influence. His sense of duty held him back. In fact, he always*

waged total war. No matter how often I asked him about it, he didn't talk much about his missions and successes. Sometimes, when the war correspondent Kark, his constant companion in recent months, began to talk, he became somewhat annoyed and tried to distract Kark from the subject with somewhat taciturn remarks.

A few weeks before his death, on the day the diamonds were awarded, he visited me in Hamburg. The awarding of the Germany Reich's highest gallantry decoration had finally lightened his spirits somewhat. His joy was heightened, however, by the fact that one of his comrades, the group commander Captain [Martin] Drewes, who was a close friend of mine, received the Knight's Cross. A so-called ruckus was organized that day. But Drewes was more in the foreground of the celebrations than Lent with his diamonds."

This once again shows his true modesty, for he was not concerned with himself, but rather with serving the greater cause.

"A few days before his tragic end," his friend continues, *"we met with some comrades in Hamburg and spent the afternoon in a restaurant on the Elbe. Kark was there. I immediately noticed that Lent, apparently freed from all official worries, had finally resolved to be truly happy. He told us about his last visit to the Führer and then, as we sat in front of the fireplace with our wives that evening, he spoke for the first time about his own family. That evening, his mood, his detachment from his everyday worries, made him seem*

many years younger than usual. He became a happy, uninhibited boy who wasn't the focus of conversation but who integrated himself into our small community. Only late at night, after an allied bomber attack on Hamburg had taken place during our evening gathering, did we part. Lent had become more serious."

"I don't want to be a popular superior," he often said. *"Popular superiors are usually wimps; they're popular because they let anything go."* Thus, his harshness and relentlessness made him uncomfortable for many, compounded by his profound love of truth. However, as is often the case with many Prussian officers, despite his austerity and unremittingness, he nevertheless possessed a profuse understanding of fine art and was open to the creative values of life.

His successes only made him modest, as he saw himself as an instrument of a higher power. Advocating for purity in all matters of life, he also advocated early marriage, setting an example himself by marrying at the early age of 23. However, he exercised very harsh judgment when granting marriage licenses and had to carefully assess the moral integrity of the applicant.

He didn't keep the operational experience he had gained to himself for personal gain, but shared it wholeheartedly, as his main concern was not to personally shoot down many enemy planes, but rather to achieve a good number of aerial victories overall.

Helmut Lent had a great sense of humor and often couched his admonitions and educational work in humorous terms,

knowing that a humorous remark could have more impact than a yell. However, if he had to resort to stronger measures, he could thunder mightily. The storm would then be very brief—but all the more deafening and effective.

He was a good instructor and teacher, possessing authority earned through his strong personality, his achievements, and his character.

He never abused his authority or exploited it for personal gain, just as he never did anything for personal gain.

He knew that the best example is accomplishment. He was a true leader, because he was a role model and compelled obedience from within.

How often did young officers sneak out of his room in embarrassment, but how often did they later express their gratitude for his tutelage and his perhaps harsh and rude reprimands and admonitions—*"What I have become, I have only become through Lent,"* said more than one of them.

His purity and integrity almost make him a textbook character, but his character was too refined for that, and he knew too much about the ambivalence of this world.

One of his tricks was—before presenting an award or expressing praise, he would invite the person in question to come to him and first pretend he had something to say to them. But anyone who could read his eyes, which he could never disguise and in which mischief was already evident, knew that this maneuver only served to make the joy afterward all the greater.

In a variation of the saying, we ask ourselves—*"Tell me where and how you find relaxation, and I will tell you who you are"*—if we seek out Helmut Lent during his hours of relaxation, we once again encounter the reach of his soul.

We find him drawing from pictures of Frederick the Great, Moltke, Mackensen, and Richthofen; we find him riding horses and playing tennis; we go to the cinema with him; we see him sitting reverently at his record player or radio, listening to the works of Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, and Mozart; we see him at the opera, listening to his favorite composer, Verdi or Puccini, and softly humming the melodies; we find him bent over books—mostly historical or religious—but also over collections of anecdotes; we sit with him in serious, long conversations about this and that problem of human life; but above all, we find him hunting, stalking in the woods and fields, lying in wait for a stag, a buck, or a small cock [note: black grouse], which brings him strength and peace, composure and relaxation, contemplation and reflection.

He wasn't a hunter and shooter, but a hunter and gamekeeper—yet another testament to his nature-loving, vigorous, and strong personality, his self-discipline.

When a particularly strong stag was released to him for the diamonds, he felt sorry for the noble animal. *"Hopefully, he's already passed on enough of his heritage,"* he said before shooting him.

Many antlers and other hunting trophies bear witness to the many hours he spent in the woods and fields, often alone, but usually accompanied by a friend. As he roamed,

wandered, not only did his limbs loosen, but his thoughts, considerations and his deep seriousness regarding life's questions also surfaced, seeking and finding answers in quiet conversation.

Thus, the picture is completed of a strong and pure character, a radiant and vital personality, who was dedicated only to the night hunt, only to the protection of the homeland, who was imbued with the passionate will to protect and defend the fatherland and over whose life, despite the abundance of glory, success and victory, Bismarck's saying can stand: that we are not here in this world to be happy, but to fulfill our duty.

Lena Lent

Helmut, his wife Lena, and their daughter Christine-Barbara (٣ 6 June 1942) in their home in Stade (Harburger Straße 185) on 5 June 1944. Daughter Helma-Elisabeth (٣ 6 October 1944) would never meet her father.

Epilog

This character study of the Luftwaffe officer, night fighter pilot, flying ace with 111 confirmed (and three further unconfirmed) aerial victories, and recipient of the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds, Helmut Johannes Siegfried Lent, is by his wife, Lena Lent.

It is not only a tribute full of enthusiasm and longing, it testifies to a deep understanding of her husband's soul and spirit, his inner world, an empathy that can only be achieved through the unrestricted, unconditional love of an honorable woman for her husband and the father of her children.

Lena Lent dedicated these lines to Major General Max Josef Ibel (1896–1981), who not only knew and respected her husband, but, as commander of the 2nd Fighter Division, to which Lent's Night Fighter Wing 3 (NJG 3) was subordinate, was responsible for the funeral ceremonies in Stade on 12 October 1944.

Major General Ibel delivered a moving eulogy and, from then on, even after the war, together with his wife Eleonore "Lore," was one of the Lent family's steadfast supporters and friends.

When the question arose as to whether Helmut Lent was indeed posthumously promoted to full Colonel (*Oberst*), although no documentation exists due to the war, Ibel submitted an affidavit stating that this promotion had indeed been requested and approved by the High Command of the Luftwaffe (OKL).

Who was Lena Lent?

Helene "Lena" Senokosnikow was born on 24 April 1914 in Moscow. Her father, Trifon Senokosnikow, was loyal to the Russian Empire and a devout Greek Catholic. When the murderous Bolsheviks tyrannized the country with their "Red Terror" during the October Revolution of 1917, Trifon Senokosnikow was forced to flee. Tens of thousands of Russians fled to France, but thousands also fled to the German Empire, which gen-

erously welcomed the emigrants and dissidents. His family was safe in Russia, allowing the father to build a life in Hamburg.

His trading company soon became successful. In 1920, he brought his family over, and six-year-old Lena began school. She quickly mastered the language and customs of her host country, soon becoming "more German than the Germans." Within a short time, father Trifon bought the "Briconti Cigarette Factory" (Königstraße 21/23, Hamburg 36), and the family was now considered wealthy.

As recently as March 1941, the cigarette factory was seeking female workers to operate machines in the "Hamburger Fremdenblatt" newspaper. In April 1943, Senokosnikow's "Import-Export-Großhandel" (Import-Export Wholesale) in the "Hamburger Tageblatt – Newspaper of the National Socialist German Workers' Party" was also seeking female personnel: a shipping clerk, an office worker, and a messenger. Men were at war, and women were sought-after employees.

In the myth-making postwar literature, it is sometimes claimed that Helene Senokosnikow used a foreign, "Germanic-sounding" name (*Elisabeth Petersen*) out of "fear of National Socialist racial policy." This claim is not only illogical, but insane. The family was called Senokosnikow and used "Senokosnikow" exclusively, as Lena's school records and the later marriage certificate show.

The family also held German citizenship. Lena was considered an exemplary *Gymnasium* student, passed her *Abitur* (university entrance qualification), and trained as a foreign language correspondent. She worked as such at her father's company from 1 April 1936 to 1 June 1942 (shortly before the birth of her first child), earning a very good salary.

During this time, she was a member of the DAF (German Labor Front), the National Socialist flagship organization of the *Volksgemeinschaft* KdF (Strength Through Joy), and the NSV (National Socialist People's Welfare). According to Section 3 of the NSV's statutes of August 14, 1933, "any upstanding member of the German people who had reached the age of 21 and was of pure Aryan descent could become a member." This also applied to Lena.

Just to clarify: Since 1938, Helene Senokosnikow had possessed the "Aryan Certificate." She was educated, played tennis, loved hiking and skiing, regularly attended church services, came from a wealthy family, and was afraid of nothing, especially not of any kind of "racial policy."

Lena is said to have actively sought contact with Helmut Lent. After shooting down three enemy Royal Air Force bombers in an aerial combat over the German Bight on 18 December 1939, he was considered one of the young heroes of the war and appeared in newspapers and magazines. As a result, he received mail from admirers – mainly young girls and women – including his future wife, Lena.

It is, of course, possible that she now used the pen name "Elisabeth Petersen" – she was not 16, but already 25, four years older than Helmut, and perhaps this made her a little uncomfortable. Lent replied to her letter, and he and Lena met on a blind date at the Hotel Reichshof in Hamburg, after which they enjoyed a skiing holiday in Hirschegg in February 1940. Soon after, he proposed to her.

On 6 August 1941, First Lieutenant Lent received permission to marry, as his military records show. The Reich Family/Clan Office (RSA) confirmed on 8 September 1941, that there were no objections to the marriage and that Miss Senokosnikow was of German or related blood: "The Aryan ancestry of Helene Senoskosnikow is recognized."

The joyous couple married on 10 September 1941 in Hamburg-Wellingsbüttel. They had two daughters. Christine-Barbara was born on 6 June 1942; the second, Helma-Elisabeth, was born on 6 October 1944, one day after her father's crash and one day before his death. Father and daughter would never meet.

When Lena Lent learned of the tragic plane crash on 5 October 1944, she went into labor. It was a difficult birth, compounded by a nervous breakdown on 7 October 1944, when she learned that her husband had succumbed to his severe injuries in Paderborn. She was neither able to attend the state ceremony at the Reich Chancellery in Berlin on 11 October, nor the funeral in Stade on 12 October, as the doctors at the hospital refused to release her. Helmut Lent's parents represented her with dignity at both sad occasions.

... but she had her memories, her feelings, and two wonderful children. Her husband and father lived on in their hearts ... and also today in the hereditary memory of present and future generations of German patriots.

We commemorate:

- Knight's Cross recipient Oberfeldwebel **Walter Kubisch** (✱ 7 September 1918 in Helbigsdorf; ✝ 6 October 1944 in Paderborn)

- Leutnant der Reserve **Werner Kark** (✱ 26 August 1913 in Hamburg; ✝ 6 October 1944 in Paderborn)

- Oberleutnant der Reserve **Hermann Klöß** (✱ 11 September 1912 in Rottweil am Neckar; ✝ 6 October 1944 in Paderborn)

- Oberstleutnant/Oberst **Helmut Lent** (✱ 13 June 1918 in Pyrehne; ✝ 7 October 1944 in Paderborn)

Andreas J. Voigt
Deutschherrenklub (DHK)
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Helmut Johannes Siegfried Lent

Officer, night fighter against Allied bombing terror over Germany, flying ace with 111 aerial victories, and recipient of the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds

Grave in Stade, photographed in November 1955
by H. J. Petersen (Petersen Weaving/Embroidery in Stade)

Grave in Stade, Old Garrison Cemetery, 2017